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THE DUBLIN LITERARY GAZETTE,

OR

WEEKLY CHRONICLE OF CRITICISM, BELLES LETTRES, AND FINE ARTS.

No. 25.

SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 1830.

PRICE 9d.

ON BURNING WOMEN ALIVE BY BRITISH AUTHORITY.

Returns ordered by the House of Commons to be printed.

The work to which we would now more especially direct the attention of our readers, is a document containing a return made to an order of the House of Commons, for copies of all communications and correspondence relative to the burning of widows on the funeral piles of their husbands, called in East India phraseology a suttee; with such proceedings as may have been had thereon in the Court of Directors of the East India Company, since the period when similar papers were presented to parliament before. The return made to this order affords authentic and detailed information on the following points: the number of widows thus burned during six years, from 1821 to 1826 both inclusive; the particulars relative to some of these sacrifices, the steps taken by the constituted authorities to abolish a practice so truly diabolical; and the results of their measures to this end.

In the present enlarged state of geographical knowledge, it is hardly necessary to detain our readers with a description of a Hindoo suttee; yet lest any should be ignorant of the nature of a custom so degrading to religion and so revolting to humanity, we shall briefly state that when a married Hindoo of certain castes or classes dies, his widow deems herself bound, by a religious duty, after some preparatory ceremonies, to place herself on the pile on which her husband's corpse is laid, to which fire is applied, generally by some of her nearest relations, but sometimes by herself, and she is thus burned alive with the late object of her affections. This sacrifice is supposed to be wholly voluntary on her part; it is also as honourable as voluntary; being deemed of such merit as to entitle the devoted victim to immediate admission, on the termination of her mortal sufferings, into the Hindoo paradise, and reflecting also much honour on her surviving relations.

The number of widows thus burned in the six years above stated, is as follows: in 1821, 654; in 1822, 583; in 1823, 575; in 1824, 572; in 1825, 639; and in 1826, 518, making a total of 3,541 of our fellow-creatures thus immolated during that period, in the heart of the British dominions, for the maintenance of a debasing and a monstrous superstition.

The mere recital of the fact is sufficiently appalling. To be assured, as we now are, upon the undoubted authority of official documents, that upwards of six hundred women annually terminate their existence in excruciating tortures, which we do not inflict on the most atrocious and most hardened offenders here, must, we conceive, excite a revulsion of the feelings of outraged humanity, sufficient to pro-

duce the immediate abolition of a custom that has too long disgraced the annals of British legislature. But our documents go still farther: they detail cases which disclose horrors still more dreadful. To exhibit these in their true colours, no highly-wrought description is necessary: it is sufficient to detail the facts as recounted in the returns; and therefore it is that we now step aside from our usual flowery path of lighter literature into the dry details of parliamentary documents, in order to direct the reader's attention to the study of the volume now before us. If he rises not from its perusal, or even from the brief abstract of it with which we shall here present him, with a burning zeal to devote himself, as far as his individual efforts can extend, to the utter and immediate abolition of the custom, we must say, that either we have altogether failed in attempting to convey our intended meaning, or else we have reason to think but little of his heart, and still less of his religious impressions.

Although we must pass slightly over the particulars of these sacrifices, and we do so, from no sickly affectation of reluctance to hurt our reader's feelings, but solely from want of space, there are one or two of them so transcendently abominable, that we must find room, at any sacrifice, for their admission. The appearance of these statements in the return, arises from the ceremony having been made the subject of legal prosecution, in consequence of some irregularity in its performance.

"Ajoodhia Misser was charged with having assisted in burning, on the funeral pile of her husband M. Deokovera, the mother of two infant children. The woman was the wife of Zorowar Singh, the uncle of the prisoner. It was clearly proved that she was burned with her own consent, and that the prisoner endeavoured to dissuade her from being so, promising to take proper care of her during her life; but that she refused to listen to his entreaties, and mounted the pile, when the prisoner, by her direction, set fire thereto. The illegality of the act consisted in its having been performed 'in the absence of the police, and in the want of a written engagement having been entered into for the maintenance of the youngest child of the woman, whose age was but two years.' Mothers of children, read this: think of the woman who could thus leave her orphan infant unprotected; and think of the religion that encourages, and of the law that tolerates the act!

"Ram Pursun and Bul Misser were charged with the murder of M. Buktee, a girl aged nine years, by burning her alive. The prisoners were the father and brother of the girl, who had been married to a Brahmin. There was no proof that force was resorted to; it was even stated that the former of the prisoners endeavoured to dissuade her; he, however, set fire to the pile, and the other pris-

ner was present." Infants deserted! Children immolated, and by their own parents! such, we must exclaim again, are the practices encouraged by a false religion, and tolerated by British law!

"Six prisoners were charged with wilful murder, under the following circumstances: A Brahmin died when absent from his family; a fortnight afterwards his widow, a girl of about fourteen years of age, proceeded to burn herself, the pile being prepared by her nearest relations. The preparatory rites being completed, she ascended the pile, which was fired by her uncle: the agony was soon beyond endurance, and she leapt from the flames; but, seized by her uncle and others, she was taken up by the hands and feet, and again thrown into the fire, much burned, and her clothes quite consumed. She again sprang from the pile, and running to a well hard by, laid herself down in the water-course, weeping bitterly. Her uncle now took a sheet, and spreading it on the ground, desired her to seat herself upon it:—'no,' she said, 'she would not do this; he would again carry her to the fire, and she could not submit to it; she would quit her family, and live by beggary—anything, if they would have mercy on her.' Her uncle, upon this, swore by the Ganges, that if she would seat herself on the cloth, he would convey her to her home; she did so. They bound her up in it; sent for a bamboo, which was passed through the loops formed by tying it together, and carrying it thus to the pile, now fiercely burning, threw it bodily into the flames. The cloth was immediately consumed, and the wretched victim once more made an effort to save herself; when, at the instigation of the rest, one of the prisoners approached near enough to reach her with his sword, and cut her throat; the head fell back, and she was released from further suffering by death." We close the book:—we give no further details of a practice devised indeed by idolaters, or by the devil himself, but, tolerated by christians, and Britons.

It must already have occurred to the reader that the actors in these infernal tragedies are represented as prisoners, liable to punishment for their conduct, and that therefore the British legislature, under whose authority the legal functionaries of the East India Company form their decisions, so far from tolerating, condemn the act, and punish the perpetrators. Let us see how the case stands, as it appears from the document before us:—a suttee is perfectly legal, according to the rules of the British government, and the decisions of its judges in India, if performed under the following circumstances: the deceased must have belonged to one of four castes specified; the widow must be sixteen years old at least; security for the support of any minor children must be given;—the pile must be open on every side, so as to allow the half burnt wretch a chance of escape, if she

pleases; and the officers of justice must be present to take care that all these provisions have been observed. The neglect of any of these renders all parties present liable to various degrees of punishment, but if they be duly observed, the ceremony is as legal as a marriage or a confirmation in England. The neglect or violation of any of these provisions indeed, subjects the offender to punishment, varying in severity according to the circumstances adduced in the evidence; but the effect of these, may be judged of by the scale of punishment inflicted on the six prisoners involved in the last mentioned case, a case which we consider to be among the most abominable of those that pollute the worst period of the annals of British jurisprudence. The man who cut the girl's throat, an act we agree with one of the judges in considering as the most merciful exhibited throughout the whole transaction, was sentenced to five years imprisonment with labour; the second, who had assisted in tying her up and throwing her back into the flames, to three years imprisonment, with labour; her two uncles, who were present and assisting, to one year's imprisonment, without labour, and two strangers, who also assisted, to two years imprisonment without labour.

The conflicting opinions of the British magistrates and judges before whom these monstrous cases were brought, are very extraordinary, exhibiting a violent, and doubtless a most painful conflict between the feelings of human nature and christianity in the individual contemplated in his private character, and the rigid discharge of duty, as viewed in that of a public functionary. The impression resting upon the mind of the unprejudiced reader after an attentive perusal of the whole volume, must be that the British legislature could annihilate the whole system by a single act, without exciting any re-action of an alarming nature in the minds of the natives, or giving any serious offence to their religious feelings; for the suttee is an act of supererogation as it were, and is not imperatively required as a duty, even by the Hindoo superstition; or, at the utmost, if any such re-action were excited from interested motives, it would be extremely trifling, and not to be compared in the extent of its consequences, as to blood and torture, to what is now annually exhibited by the over-cautious reluctance in the governing power to interfere with the native institutions of the country. We say, from interested motives, because the papers before us present abundant evidence to prove that pecuniary considerations are at the bottom of this most extraordinary display of female self-devotion; for it appears clearly from them, that, in most instances, the relations have a reversionary claim to the property of the victim thus immolated, and the priests or Brahmins a direct interest in it also, by the bequests of ornaments and money which always precede the ceremony.

We are borne out in our opinion by one of the British judges, who in giving his opinion on each of the cases coming under his cognizance, acquits the prisoner from the charge of murder, on the principle that the government should either totally extinguish the practice, or leave the natives wholly to the guidance of their own laws and customs, as to it. "Our government," says he, "by modifying the thing, and issuing orders about it, orders which even the government and the judges themselves do not appear clearly to comprehend, have thrown

the ideas of the Hindoos upon the subject into a complete state of confusion. They know not what is allowed, and what is interdicted; but, upon the whole, they have a persuasion that our government, whom they most erroneously suppose to be indifferent about the lives of natives, are rather favorable to suttées than otherwise. They will then believe that we abhor the usage, when we prohibit it *in toto* by an absolute and peremptory law. They have no idea that we might not do so with the most perfect safety; they conceive our power and our will to be commensurable."

On reading a discussion which lately took place in the House of Commons relative to the great expense incurred by the printing of parliamentary papers, we were forcibly struck with the complaint of one of the members, who stated that the report on this subject was swelled into a folio volume of 270 pages, and filled up with a list of names of which we knew and could know nothing. We had not at the time seen the volume thus commented on in the true spirit of counting-house calculation. We have seen it since. It corresponds very nearly with the member's statement; it contains 275 pages of text, and is in a great measure filled with the catalogue of names he condemns. But the impression left on our mind by the attentive perusal of this catalogue, in his opinion so worthless, was diametrically the reverse of his. On opening the volume we read, and read the statement with sensations of horror, which we then thought could scarcely be heightened. The contemplation *en masse* of upwards of three thousand five hundred innocent females consigned to death by fire, was horrible, their sufferings, their fearful torture, their too late repentance, their ineffectual efforts at escape in the period of their excruciating agony, were frightful; but when, on turning to the catalogue, we behold them passing one by one in review before us, when we see each advancing in silent solemn self-possession, and one after the other undergoing the same routine of torment, the heart gradually sickens; the irritating emotions roused to intensity relax, not into the tone of unfeeling heartlessness, but into the frightful calm of a bewildering despondency. The whole long train of shrieking widows and smouldering fires appears in its never-ending succession like the phantasmagoria of some strange hallucination; we wish to persuade ourselves we are not creatures of such a species, our mental faculties lie prostrate as under the operation of some long continued torture too painful to be endured, too weighty to be shaken off; and we are tempted to exclaim in the words of the old English dramatist,

Thou hast brought me to that dull calamity,
To that strange misbelief of all the world
And all things that are in it—that I fear
I shall fall like a tree, and find my grave
Only remembering that I grieve.

On the whole, the burning alive of Hindoo widows, though apparently by their own act, is in reality that of our Indian government, which is answerable for the evils of a toleration that it might abolish if it would. The Indian government is the instrument, the creature of the British legislature, which can model and direct it at its sovereign pleasure; the British legislature is the combined voice of every individual in this united kingdom, who, if our constitution asserts what is the truth, have each a share in its formation, and are therefore personally accountable for its acts. If this in-

duction be correct, every one of us is answerable for his fractional part of every shriek of anguish, of every writhing of agony forced from suffering nature in a Hindoo suttee. We cannot shake off this responsibility; and the sooner we look to it the better.

Perhaps we have spoken too warmly on this subject, for we confess our heart burns and our blood boils within us while we write; but how can a freeborn Briton speak too warmly in the cause of truth, of justice, and humanity? Our earnest prayer is, that our cry, however feeble, may be found effectual to arrest attention and obtain redress. The Quakers of Dublin were the first people in modern times who raised their voice with vigour and effect against the existence of slavery. We trust with becoming humility that we ourselves may be somewhat instrumental in crushing this other abomination, so revolting to humanity and religion.

[Since concluding this paper, (which was written some time ago, at the moment of reading the Report, but postponed in consequence of the pre-occupation of our columns by other matter,) we have heard with great satisfaction, that an official order has issued from the Governor-general of India in Council, for abolishing the practice of burning women or burying them alive, and declaring all persons in any way aiding or abetting in such acts, to be guilty of culpable homicide. We understand also that this order has been submitted to by the natives, almost without a murmur. It is useless now, unfortunately, to lament that this was not done long ago; but it yet remains for the British legislature to place the law beyond the neglect or caprice of any future Governor, and to make the punishment capital, as the offence is murder.]

REVIEWS OF BOOKS.

Introductions to the Study of the Greek Classic Poets; designed principally for the use of young persons at School and College. By H. N. Coleridge, Esq. M. A. late Fellow of King's College, Cambridge.—London, Murray.

We opened this volume with a rush of delightful associations; it treats of Homer, and Homer is to us a delicious dream of youth. We read him, over and over again we read him, with all the freshness and much of the undoubting faith of boyhood, and we found him that flowery hill-side that Milton tells of, for being so ancient and so excellent a book, we read him, as Mr. Coleridge prescribes, with patience and a simple mind. Even now, though the ceaseless round of business and of study has long withdrawn us from the sweet society of that laureat fraternity of classic poets whom we delight to honour, and placed us in a position less congenial to our nature, yet better fitted, perhaps, by its cares and anxieties, its temptations to evil and its opportunities of good, to that state of trial and discipline appointed for man in this his earthly pilgrimage, we still gladly seize any occasion to return to the cities of the silent, and linger once again within the hallowed portals of those solemn temples which genius has raised in honour of the great of old. Mr. Coleridge's book is written for a purpose which we have long wished, and sometimes struggled, to accomplish. It is to open the eye of the soul, of those who read the ancient classics. To